Privately printed W. P. 41

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CHAMPLAIN.

[Written for the Montreal Pen and Pencil Club.]

A hundred years had rolled their changeful rounds
Since Spain's bold sailors, following in the track
Of him, the great revealer of the West,
Sailed far into the sunset. Summer seas
Of deepest azure, smiling islands clothed
With densest verdure, cheered their course. The vines,
Gay with strange flowers and twined from branch to branch,
Gave shelter from the scorching rays of noon.
A varied screen of brilliant hues concealed
The rigid outlines of the lofty peaks
From shore to summit, and their shadows sank
Far down into serene translucent depths
Of placid ocean, carrying hues of earth
To deck the coral walls and shell-strewn floors
Where sea-sprites dwelt. They sailed by long low shores,
Which smoked with fatness in the generous sun;
And through the shady groves glanced graceful forms
Of kindly natives—gentle-mannered, frank.
With fearless steps and open child-like mien
They came to meet the strangers—soon to be
Their pitiless oppressors.

All the while,
Far to the North, the lonely ocean surged
'Gainst desolate shores, rock-bound—the summer haunt
Of screaming wild fowl, and the winter home
Of bears and wolves and foxes. Scanty tribes
Of Indians hunted for their hard-won food,
And gained a bare subsistence. Ocean raged
Incessant 'gainst that battlemented shore;
And the winds wailed amid the forests black
Of Markland[1]—moaning—weary with lament—
In utter loneliness; for no Christian soul
As yet had dared to tarry in this wild,

[1] Markland: The name given by the Northmen to the country now known as Nova Scotia.

Nor tempt its savage sternness. Eastwards far—
Half way to Europe—where the unquiet sea
Heaves aye its bosom 'gainst the clinging mist
Which weighs it down, amidst the twilight grey
And dank, the frequent sail of fishing craft
Or Basque or Breton loomed. There, æons long,
Great fleets of bergs, freighted on Arctic shores,
Sailing with rending shock of glaciers vast,
Had dropped their stony burdens in the depth
And shallowed up the black abysm, and made
Fit home for finny tribes innumerable.
Beyond this dim and melancholy veil
Of mist, enshrouding all the Western Sea,
But few had cared to pierce; for legends dread
Haunted the rock-bound coast. The Demon's Isle
Guarded the northern passage. In the thick air
The shuddering sailors heard the shrieks and howls
Of fiends malignant, high o'er roar of waves,
Torturing the souls of men, whose battered bones
Were beaten small in seethe and hiss of foam,
Grinding for ever on the shelving rocks
That skirt the dreary coast of Helluland.—[2]
Nor there alone, for ghostly teachers told
How, when the blessed saving Cross of Christ
Swept over Europe, all the evil fiends
In terror fled to the West; and still we see
Ill-omen'd and distorted struggling shapes
Of gnomes and goblins frozen into stone
In forms fantastic on the western fronts
Of high cathedrals. So the demons fled,
And, sheltered by impenetrable mists,
Over the whitening bones of drownèd men,
On gloomy forest shore or rocky coast,
Held hideous carnival.

With steadfast mind
Into this hidden world sailed Champlain. Few before
Had followed up St. Lawrence mighty flood.—
Basque whalers, pressing hard their monstrous prey,
Or traders to a savage rendezvous
At Tadoussac, held for a few short weeks
Of summer; else deserted all the year.
No trader he—our sailor—loftier thoughts
His bosom swelled: to trace the setting sun

[2] Helluland: The name given by the Northmen to Labrador.

Up his broad path of waters to his home
In that far Western Ocean—restful—calm—
Which laves the shores of rich Cathay, and breathes
Spice-laden odours towards the realms of Ind.
Nor this alone;—to bear the Cross of Christ,
Still conquering and to conquer all, until
The demons, routed in their last retreat
In the gloomy North, should hie them henceforth down
To their own seats, nor harass mankind more.

A wide experience trained him for such task.
In Henry's cause he earned a soldier's fame,
When the white plume i' the thick of battle danced
And bore the rising fortune of Navarre
Where conflict raged the fiercest. Peace ensured,
The adventurous sailor blood which coursed
In all his race resumed its sway, and urged
Him on to bold emprise i' the Western Sea.
His skill had steered his ever-prosperous barque
Through all the mazes of the Spanish main
And all its wealth of islands. He had trod,
Before the Aztec glory died away,
The streets of Cortez' city, and his pen
And ready pencil made report of all
The wonders marked by his observant eye.
Northwards, his venturous skill had traced the coast
Of Norembegue,[3] and borne on rushing tides
Had searched the Bay of Fundy to its depths,
And noted Ouygoudy's[4] wondrous stream
Flow in and outwards with a double fall.
Nor was he wanting in those gentler arts
Which bind men each to other. Oft the woods
Which overhang Port Royal's Basin[5] rang
With laughter of his joyous band, and rang
The steep escarpèd barrier to the North
With echoes of their hunters' music. There—
Where the resistless tides of Fundy pour
Swift through a narrow cleft, and sudden fill
To the brim the basin and the long-drawn vale

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[3] Norembegue: The name given in Champlain's time to the north-east coast of New England.

[4] Ouygoudy: Indian name of the River St. John, recorded in Champlain's Voyages. It can be entered at half tide only. At low tide there is a fall outwards, and at high tide a fall from the sea inwards over a ledge of rock.

[5] Port Royal: Now Annapolis, in Nova Scotia.

Far inland—there, with feasting, song, and tale
They wore one winter out, till spring returned
Too soon, to call them from their restful ease
To the great task.

For now the hour had come,
The birth-hour of a nation doomed to pass
Through many wars and changes great, until,
By God's mysterious providences blessed,
The little seedling—planted now in faith,
And through long weary years watered with tears
And blood—deep-rooted, broad and strong, should spread
A stately tree, its branches East and West
From the stern surges of the Atlantic coast
To that mysterious margin—dreamy bound,
Of the great tranquil ocean, where lie hid
The secrets of the sunset, and the sun
Renews his strength to dawn on Eastern lands.

As through the curtain grey of ice and mist
Brake Champlain, on his right emerged Cape Ray,
Repellent with its walls of beetling cliffs,
Their level summits clad with lingering snow,
Brilliantly chill. To the left, clothed with black spruce,
The frowning mountains of Cape Breton rose
Steep from the ocean. Isle St. Paul lay close,
Dense-wooded, scarce distinguished from the mass
Of the larger mountains. Through this gateway grim
He sailed into St. Lawrence' broadening gulf;
Nor paused until the mighty buttressed peak
Of Mount St. Anne, thrust through its robe of green
And dyed with iron hues of ochrey red,
Flamed in the sunrise. Percé Rock below,
Like some Titanic ruin, lit by the sun,
Whose rays streamed through the double arches, lay
Its huge mass stretched along; its cloudy top
Clamorous with sea fowl. On he sailed, and passed
The coast of Honguedo,[6] dark with pines,
And high above the river flood, which washed
Its craggy shores. Far north, the cruel teeth
Of Manicougan's fateful reef just showed
Through the long line of breakers. Short his stay
At Tadoussac. With favouring wind and tide
He stemmed the flowing current, till he reached

[6] Honguedo: Name for Gaspé in the oldest maps.

That wondrous Strait, where close th' opposing hills
To build the stately portal of the West.
There ! at the foot of that stupendous rock,
Which towers above a basin sheltered round
By mountains slowly stooping from their heights
In terraces of verdure to the deep
And ever-tranquil water.—In that charmèd spot
Of solemn beauty was the cradle placed
Of our Canadian Empire. Grand the site
And great the founder ! Mark his forehead calm—
His serious eyes, but prone to gleam with mirth
As fit to gaze on danger—resolute mouth,
Adorned with trim moustache and courtly beard,
Showing a man as skilled and apt to tread
The gallant Bearnais' court as the slant deck,
Slippery with foam and ice, when northern storm
Swoops on the treacherous Gulf, and through the dark
Aloft the demons hurtle through the air
With hiss and shriek. The frozen cordage sticks
In the icy block, and struck by the impetuous seas,
The frail barque shudders to her lowest keel.
One little light, alone, in all that world
Of blackness, gleams to light the magic card
That points the course ; and there his quiet eyes
Are fixed. But, in his heart, whether at sea
Or at the court or in the savage camp,
The light of duty ever shone supreme,
Nor swerved his steady course or here or there.
And such a site whereon to plant the tree
Of rising empire ! Holds this varied world
No peer to its majestic beauty. Look !
Those solemn hills, which close the distance dim
Of the far horizon, how their contours, clothed
With summer foliage, smile as they slope down,
Bathed in the sunlight, to the rippling flood
Which laps their bases ; and the azure vault
Mirrors its brightness with the changing hues
Of blue and purple in the dimpling waves.—
An amphitheatre, whose circles vast
Rise upwards from the central basin, reared
For high assembly of the earlier gods,
And Zeus' high seat might rest upon the Cape
And dominate the concourse. All the scene
Was clad in summer's livery. Blue in the sky
And water ; on the hills a living green
Sheening to yellow in the twinkling birch

And glooming in the pines—all glowing tints
Of the upper rainbow, for the autumn hues
Of crimson, gold and scarlet were not yet.

Time fails; nor is it now my task to tell
The labours and the anxious toil and want
Which threatened year by year to crush Quebec—
For so in Indian speech was called the Strait
Where mountains curb St. Lawrence waters in
Before the basin widens, and the name
Was given to the city. Champlain's care
Urged on the work, and his far-seeing eyes
Prepared for every danger. Still he strove
To learn the secrets of that glorious land
Of woods and waters, on whose threshold stood
His infant city; now, by questionings close
Of friendly natives; then, devoid of fear,
In bark canoe, with Indian guides, he dared
To trace Ottawa's[7] rapid current, up
Almost to Lake Temiscamangue, its source;
Then, mounting to Nipissing's weary lake,
Swiftly he sped the rapid river down,
And reached that bay of wizard beauty, where
The frequent islets seem to float, so like,
In calms, the upper and the nether blue;
Thence he explored Muskoka's rocky glens,
Threaded by crystal streamlets and adorned
With lakes of gleaming silver. West and south—
Still onward—to a lovely garden land,
Fair even in winter. On its farther verge
A bold escarpment overlooks a plain,—
And, on long summer days, the gladdened eye
Dwells on a scene of beauty stretched below
Still richer. Like a billowy sea of smiling green
The woodlands wave below, and, far off, sweep
To distant shores of mighty land-locked seas—
The bourne to which the spirits of the dead
Addressed of yore their journey lone; nor reached
But after weary travel. Thence he turned
And dwelt a winter 'mong the guileful tribes
Of Hurons. Joining in their distant wars,
He traversed all the centre of our land

[7] Ottáwa: These Indian words were generally accented upon the penultimate syllable, as Torónto. In Niágara we throw back the Indian accent which pronounced Niagára.

With a wild swarm of painted warriors fierce,
Flocking, in light canoes, like wild fowl set
On autumn journey to the south. He passed
Up Severn's stream and o'er Toronto's[8] lake,
Whose mirrored shadows, opalescent, glowed
With tremulous colour as the paddles dipped
And turned, disturbing all the magic scenes
Of sylvan beauty in its depths profound.
Still southwards down the rushing Trent he urged
His frail canoe; at times through level lakes,
Shooting, at times, down rapids. Quick the eye
And firm the wrist to hold the steady course
On the smooth current's crest. But where the stream,
With glassy torrent, glides unruffled down
And backwards swirls in foam against the rocks,
Then, landing on the narrow rugged trail,
O'er boulders wet and slippery with spray,
And stooping 'neath the brushwood overhead,
He, with his savage guides, their burdens bore
Down the portage's weary steep, until
The quiet water called them to embark.
At length he reached a place 'twixt verdurous banks—
The loveliest which Ontario's waters hold,
Where Quinte's matchless bay unruffled smiles.

So passed his busy life: unselfish toil
His chief enjoyment. Many things he learned
By frequent journeys with his savage friends,
And in campaigns against their Indian foes.
He first explored the lake which bears his name.
First to his eyes the deep pellucid mere
Of Horicon revealed its beauty. Much
He learned from Indian hunters. All the North
He mapped with rare precision. Known to him
Was that great inland ocean whither flow
The cheerless streams of drear Estotiland;[9]
Where Mistassini trails his sinuous coils
Of waters, circling deserts bare and frore,
And yields again unto the chilling night
The steely glitter of a million stars.
Meantime, by often voyaging to France,
He urged his infant country's pressing needs,

[8] Toronto's Lake: The name of Lake Toronto is given in the old French maps to Lake Simcoe.

[9] Estotiland: The old name given to the interior of Labrador which drains into Hudson Bay.

And so his work grew strong. He ever loved
The Ocean, and upon her rocking breast
She bore him always safely; never harm
Befel him there. He loved our country most,
And when God called him, there he laid his head
In peace upon her bosom. And his work
Still prospered—till there came an evil time
When bigot counsels sapped the strength of France,
And drove to exile many a faithful heart
And stalwart arm; and faith grew faint, and fraud
And peculation smirched the lily flag,
And avarice and greed stalked through the land.
Then died the love of duty. In its place
Arose the point of honour. Poor exchange!
For honour is self-centred—duty lives
From man to God. So all the West was lost
To France. But Champlain's work survives; for still,
Though from Cape Diamond's lofty peak no more
Floats the White Flag, his dear-loved mother tongue
Still flourishes, pervading all the land
He travelled; and his faith still lives—devout,
Yet tolerant here, as in the happy days
Before the fatal revocation knelled
The waning power of France; and still survive
The laws and customs of the France he knew.

Sans peur et sans reproche—thou, blest of God!
Thy name still dwells unsullied. Never spot
Of greed, or cowardice, or lust, or hate
Stained thy white scutcheon. Swiftly sped thy soul
Up the dread circles, where the healing flames
Purge out the lingering dross and make men pure
To bear the garments of the searching light
In courts of heavenly glory. Worthy, thou,
To be a nation's founder! and may we
Be not unworthy of thee! May thy faith
In our Dominion's fortunes, and thy truth
And love of duty guide us on our course.
So shall our country flourish—thine as ours—
So long—no longer.

S. E. Dawson.

Montreal, Dec. 13, 1890.